

# The Bethune Memorial House

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Norman Bethune went to China in 1938; less than two years later, he was to die a hero. In those two years, he accomplished more than most men do in a lifetime. There in the isolated mountains of war-torn China, he established a medical program where none had existed before. And by his example of selfless devotion, he inspired millions of people who had never seen him.

His story started in Gravenhurst, Ontario, a small lumbering town, 100 miles north of Toronto. His father, Malcolm Nicolson Bethune (1857-1932), came from an old Canadian family which traced its ancestry to Scottish lairds and French Huguenots; his father, Norman's grandfather, had been one of the founding doctors of the medical faculty of Trinity College, Toronto. In 1887, Malcolm married Elizabeth Ann Goodwin (1852-1948), the daughter of an English "wood turner", or skilled carpenter. After his graduation from Knox Theological College in Toronto, they moved with their infant daughter, Janet Louise, to Gravenhurst, where Malcolm was ordained at Knox Presbyterian Church. Henry Norman was born in the manse on March 3, 1890. Their third child, Malcolm Goodwin, was born in 1892.

From an early age, Norman was a rambunctious child, curious, independent and stubborn; it was often difficult for him to stay within the confines set by his parents. Once when he was six, he wandered away from his home in Toronto to explore the city, returning on his own several hours later. His father's frequent transfers may have intensified this wanderlust; the Bethunes left Gravenhurst when he was three and moved six more times before he was fourteen.

After he left home, he continued to wander. In 1911, he interrupted his studies in biology at the University of Toronto to work at Frontier College, setting up classes for immigrant workers in a bush lumber camp in northern Ontario. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. While serving as a stretcher bearer, he was wounded at Ypres, France and returned home to finish his medical degree. In 1917, he re-enlisted, this time in the Royal Navy.

After demobilization, he remained in England for most of the next five years while he was engaged in post-graduate studies. In 1923, he married Frances Campbell Penney, the daughter of a prominent Edin-

Bethune family about 1893 (Norman seated on the horse).



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burgh Court Accountant. Because of their great temperamental differences, theirs was to be a stormy relationship. They moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Bethune set up his first, and only, private practice. He was 34. Two years later, he contracted tuberculosis.

Following treatment at the Caldyor Sanatorium in Gravenhurst, he was admitted into the Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac Lake, New York State. Outwardly, he maintained his flamboyant manner; inwardly, he brooded. Isolated by the stringent rules and the enforced rest, divorced by Frances, everything seemed to be merely a "dance of death". When he discovered a description of artificial pneumothorax, a risky operation in which air is pumped into the disease lung cavity, he demanded the treatment. Within a month, he recovered and left the sanatorium where he had spent a year. He was relieved. Henceforth, he decided, he would dedicate himself to the eradication of tuberculosis.

Early in 1928, Bethune moved to Montreal, where he was to live for the next eight years. For five years, he was the First Surgical Assistant to Dr. Edward Archibald, Canada's pioneering thoracic (chest) surgeon, at the Royal Victoria Hospital. In 1933, because of personal and professional frictions with

Group of tubercular patients, taken at Trudeau Sanatorium 1927. Bethune seated on left.



some of the other doctors, he left to head up the Department of Thoracic Surgery at the Sacré Coeur Hospital in Cartierville, ten miles north of Montreal. Although Sacré Coeur was a smaller, less prestigious hospital, he was twice elected to the Executive Committee of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery while he was there.

In addition to practical surgery, Bethune wrote numerous articles for medical journals, introducing new surgical techniques and outlining improvements based on his own research. He designed many new instruments and constantly experimented to improve them. One of them, the "Bethune Rib Shears", is still manufactured.

Professionally, Bethune gained international recognition as a skillful, dedicated surgeon; socially, he was more unorthodox. He was a complex man who could both antagonize and inspire. In 1929, he remarried Frances, but frictions between them led to divorce in 1933. His friends during these years were mainly creative people, and Bethune himself was a talented amateur artist. His perceptive wit could transform mundane events, but he often took what he called "my irritating delight in shocking the timid". Publicly, he could be seen driving his jaunty yellow roadster, wearing unconventional clothes. One friend remembers that he was like "some meteor passing".

But, Bethune could not be unaffected by the Depression; one-third of the population of Montreal was on direct relief. As he became aware of the effect of the Depression on the health of the poor, Bethune came to feel that medicine must concern itself with the social causes of disease as well as the medical symptoms. In 1935, he set up a free clinic for the unemployed. Later that summer, he attended the International Physiological Conference in the Soviet Union and used this opportunity to examine socialized medicine. Although he saw much that he could not agree with, he was convinced that only governmental regulation of private medical practice would ensure treatment of all, regardless of financial status. His articles became editorials to the medical profession, and in 1936, he organized The Montreal Group for the Security of the People's Health, the first group promoting socialized medicine sponsored by medical personnel in Canada. That same year he joined the Communist Party.

During the summer of 1936, another event occurred that was to change Bethune's life: the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Supported by the military might of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, Francisco Franco led a rebellion against the democratically-elected government of Spain. The war polarized opinions; like many others, Bethune felt that Democracy was threatened unless the military dictatorship was stopped in Spain. In September, 1936, he volunteered to go to Spain under the auspices of The Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, a Canadian agency.

Shortly after arriving in Madrid, Bethune conceived of a mobile blood transfusion service which could collect blood from donors in the cities and transport it wherever it was most needed. Within a month, the unit was functioning. Although Bethune later referred to it as a "glorified milk delivery service", his mobile blood bank has been called the greatest innovation in military medicine of the Spanish Civil War.

In February, 1937, Bethune set off with his unit to the besieged city of Malaga on the south coast of Spain. Before he could reach it, the city fell. On the road he encountered more than 40,000 refugees fleeing to Almeria, 100 miles away, carrying children and possessions. Those who could go no further lay down beside the road to die. For three days, Bethune

Bethune operating at Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal, 1933.



and his unit ferried the most desperate to the safety of Almeria. Then, Almeria, too, was bombed. The deliberate bombing of civilian refugees was something that Bethune could never understand, and once seen, could never forget. "Spain", he later wrote to Frances, "is a scar on my heart".

By May, 1937, the military medical forces in Republican Spain were organized into a bureaucracy within which Bethune felt he could no longer function. Angry and exhausted, he returned to Canada but set off immediately on a cross-country speaking tour to raise money for the work in Spain.

That summer, however the Japanese forces invaded China, beginning the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although many people were convinced of the cause in Spain, China was remote. But Bethune felt

Spain 1937.



that in China, another military dictatorship was on the march; the second incident of another world war had occurred. "Spain and China", he wrote, "are part of the same battle. I am going to China because that is where the need is the greatest".

On January 8, 1938, Bethune left Canada for the last time, accompanied by Jean Ewen, a Canadian nurse, and \$5,000 worth of medical supplies. He travelled to Hankow, the provisional capital, where Chou En-lai, the Communist representative, offered him an escort to Yenan, the Communist headquarters, some 500 miles northwest. After travelling under the most harrowing war-time conditions, he finally arrived there a month later.

The night he arrived, he was summoned by Mao Tse-tung, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Mao warmly welcomed Bethune, and during their all-night discussion, invited him to stay and supervise the Eighth Route Army Border Hospital. Within a month, Bethune decided that he would be more effective at the front where he could treat the wounded immediately.

On May 1, he left Yenan for the mountain ranges of the isolated Chin-Ch'a-Chi Border Region, 200 miles north, where the fighting was the fiercest. He stayed there for the rest of his life, the year and a half that remained. He was appalled by the unsanitary conditions that he found there. The wounded,



brought back from the battle days or weeks before, lay huddled under thin blankets, their dressings unchanged, their wounds gangrenous. For many, amputation was the only treatment. Refusing to rest after five days of tortuous travel, Bethune set to work immediately. In the following weeks, he made an inspection tour of the whole area, stopping only long enough to operate.

In this area of 13,000,000 people, Bethune was one of the few qualified doctors. Realizing that those he trained could in turn train others, Bethune threw his energies into teaching. He set up classes in the fundamentals of first aid, sanitation and basic surgery. He wrote and illustrated manuals which were then translated and mimeographed for distribution. Most of his trainees were adolescents with little or no medical training; his goal was to graduate doctors in one year, and nurses in six months.

During the first summer, Bethune spoke to his military superiors about establishing a hospital right at the front for both teaching and treatment. Although they advised against it for tactical reasons, they permitted him to go ahead because of their great respect for him. For two months, he planned and supervised the construction of his beloved "Model Hospital" which opened with great ceremony on September 15, 1938. It was destroyed by enemy action within three weeks.



Bethune then realized that in the guerrilla war-zone of China, all medical facilities had to be mobile. "The time is past", he emphasized in his next monthly report, "in which doctors will wait for the patients to come to them. They must go to the wounded." In the next year, he travelled more than 3,000 miles, 400 of them on foot through the steep passes where the mules could not go. Adapting local materials, he devised a portable operating theatre which could be carried on two mules. He operated at a prodigious rate; once he operated on 115 cases in 69 hours without stopping even when under heavy artillery fire.

Within a short time, the name *Pai Ch'iu-en* ("Bethune" rendered phonetically into Chinese) became legendary. "Attack! *Pai Ch'iu-en* is with

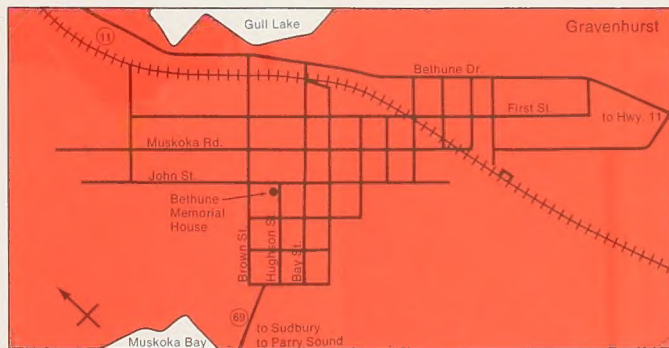
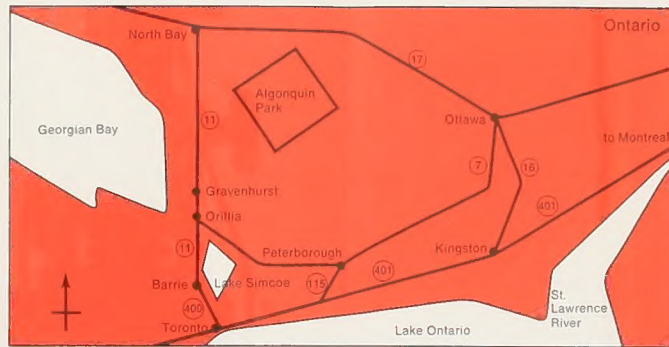


us!" became the soldiers' battle cry. Tales were told of this extraordinary foreigner who was undaunted by hardship, who gave his clothes, his food and even his own blood to the wounded. Each person who had seen him, who had been treated by him, who had touched him, added another story. Once, they said, he travelled a whole day to treat one soldier, and then returned.

Bethune, in turn, responded to the dedication of the Chinese. Working with them, he lost his impatience. "It is true I am tired", he wrote to a friend in Canada. "But I don't think I have been so happy for a long time . . . I am needed".

Near the end of October, while operating on a wounded soldier, Bethune accidentally cut his finger because there were no rubber gloves. At the time, his own wound did not seem important — it had happened before without mishap. But this time, infection set in, a virulent form of blood poisoning. Nothing could be done to save him who had saved so many. But even while he was dying, he refused to stop working.

Norman Bethune died in the early hours of November 12, 1939. While he was alive he had been their hero. Death made him a martyr.



When Chairman Mao heard of his death, he wrote "In Memory of Norman Bethune". In time, this has become one of his most famous essays. Now, it is required reading in China, and Bethune is revered as the ideal of selfless devotion to duty. His picture appears on posters, books and postage stamps. Sometimes only a fragment of a sentence from Mao's essay is enough to identify him: "Without thought of self . . ."

Throughout China, memorials have been erected to extoll his example. The Model Hospital has been rebuilt. His bomb shelter in the side of a hill, the disused temple in which he operated and houses in which he lived have all been restored as museums. In 1950, his body was moved into the Cemetery of Martyrs in Shih-chia-chuang which is dedicated to more than 25,000 who died in the war of resistance. In this huge park, there is only one larger-than-life statue, that of Norman Bethune. Across the street, beside the Bethune museum, is the 800-bed Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital.

In Canada, his birthplace, the former Presbyterian manse in Gravenhurst where his story began, was acquired by the Federal Government in 1973, and officially opened in 1976 as a Canadian memorial.

#### The Norman Bethune Memorial House

The Bethune Memorial House is maintained and operated by Parks Canada on behalf of the Department of External Affairs of the Government of Canada.

The house was built in 1880 as the Presbyterian manse and, until it was acquired, had served as a minister's residence. It is located at the corner of John and Hughson Streets, two blocks from Knox Church where Malcolm Bethune was the minister from 1889 to 1893.

The principal rooms in the house have been furnished to the period 1890, in an endeavour to recreate their probable appearance when Norman Bethune was born here. The refurbishing is intended to reflect the tastes and habits of the Bethune family.

There is also a biographical display on the second floor which uses quotes and pictures to portray the life of Norman Bethune and ends with illustrations of how his memory is revered in China today.

The house is open to the public daily, including Sundays, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. from June 1st to Labour Day, inclusive. During the rest of the year, the house is open daily, except statutory holidays, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Gravenhurst is located on Highway 11, 100 miles north of Toronto, in the heart of the Muskoka District.



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